

The First World War (1914 to 1918).

The Schlieffen Plan.

The German commanders realised that if war came they faced the danger of fighting two enemies at once: France to the west and Russia to the east. This would mean splitting their forces in two. They had therefore worked out a plan, in 1895, to deal with this problem. It was called the Schlieffen Plan, and it was a calculated gamble. The Germans took two risks. The first was that the Russians would be slow to get ready for war. They hoped that they would have three clear weeks before Russia could mobilise its troops and have to be faced on the Eastern Front. The second risk they took was that Britain would not join in the war when Germany invaded Belgium. Britain had a treaty with Belgium which went back to 1839. In this treaty Britain had promised to support Belgium's neutral position in war and go to its help if attacked.

If they were right, and these two gambles worked, the Germans believed they would be able to defeat France rapidly. According to the Schlieffen Plan, the left wing of the German army would attack France along the frontier from Metz to Switzerland. Their only task was to keep the French army pinned down along this line where their attack was expected. Meanwhile, the right wing would sweep round through Belgium, taking France by surprise, cross northern France, capture Paris and trap the French army from behind. Their advance would be like a huge swinging door, with Metz as the hinge. Then, with France defeated, the German army could concentrate on attacking Russia. The whole plan was carefully worked out in detail to a strict timetable.

The German advance.

The war began on 3 August 1914, when German troops invaded Belgium. The great German advance nearly succeeded. Their right wing swung through Belgium and France, until they were only 20 miles from Paris. However, several important things went wrong. First, the Belgians put up more resistance than expected, especially at Liège. This slowed down the German advance. The British kept to their treaty with Belgium and sent over the British Expeditionary Force.

The Kaiser was amazed and angry at Britain for going to war, and keeping to their treaty with Belgium which he called 'a scrap of paper'. He also called the BEF 'a contemptibly little army'. However, the BEF did attack the flank of the German right wing, forcing their line of advance to the east of Paris, not the west as planned. The Russians, for their part, mobilised more quickly than the Germans had expected and invaded Germany. The Germans had to send two divisions to try to stop them on the Eastern Front. Lastly, the German advance was too rapid for their own supply transport to keep up. By late August, the Germans had reached the River Marne, but were weakened, tired and hungry.

At this point, the Allies (France and Britain) counter-attacked. The battle front was so close to Paris that the French used taxis from the city to drive soldiers to the front line.

The German advance was stopped at the Battle of the Marne and then pushed back. For five days the German army retreated until they managed to dig themselves into trenches and the allies found they could not advance any further. They too dug themselves in facing the German positions. These trenches eventually stretched from the Channel coast to the Swiss border. There was little change in these positions until mid-1918. Both sides were held in a deadlock.

Why were so many killed?

Casualties among the soldiers on all sides were enormous — an average of over 5,000 a day. There were several reasons for these figures.

Mass recruitment.

The armies were huge.

Mass transport.

Huge armies could be transported about quickly and easily by train.

Industry.

In the 50 years before the war, most European countries had developed heavy industries. The factories making iron, steel and chemicals now provided the materials for new deadly weapons to equip each army.

Defensive weapons.

The most effective weapons were those used by soldiers in defensive positions: the rifle, the mortar, the heavy guns of the artillery and, above all, the machine-gun. The machine-gun, which was usually fired from a trench or dug-out, could kill with great efficiency.

TRENCH WARFARE.

The only place which was safe from the deadly fire of the machine-guns was in a trench dug into the ground. Every soldier carried tools to dig such as part of his equipment.

Along the north-west of the line of trenches, the ground was flat and wet. British soldiers held much of this section. The two lines of trenches faced each other, a few hundred metres apart. In front of the trenches were coils of barbed wire, to stop attacking soldiers. The stretch of land between the two lines of trenches was called 'No Man's Land'.

Tactics.

The generals on both sides did not know how to break the deadlock. Their only method of attack was to pound the enemy trenches with artillery, then send the soldiers 'over the top' of the trenches, on foot, towards the enemy lines. They hoped that they could break through the enemy lines by sheer weight of numbers.

These wasteful attacks cost thousands of lives.

The soldiers who were forced to live and die in these conditions did not always have a high opinion of the generals.

New ideas.

GAS.

Some new ideas were tried to drive the enemy out of their trenches. One of these was poison gas. This was first used by the Germans in the Second Battle of Ypres, in 1915, but was soon used by both sides. Its effect was horrible.

TANKS.

One new invention which could end the deadlock of trench warfare was the tank. A few were used by the Allies at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, but they were not used in great numbers until the Battle of Cambrai in 1917. They were still very primitive in design.

The home front in Britain.

The First World War was fought on many fronts, on land, sea and in the air, and it affected everybody, including civilians at home.

Most directly, many civilians in Britain were killed by enemy action: 121 were killed when the town of Hartlepool was shelled by a German battleship in 1914; Whitby and Scarborough were also shelled. There were bombing raids by Zeppelin airships in which 564 civilians lost their lives. Later in the war German bomber aircraft bombed British cities, causing even more loss of life. No longer were the British people safe in their island.

Conscription.

Conscription was not started until 1916. Until then the British army was made up of volunteers. Different kinds of pressure were put on young men to join up. Some women began giving white feathers to young men in the street who were not in uniform. Posters were issued and music-hall songs were composed which carried the same message.

Propaganda.

A wave of patriotism swept the country in the first years of the war. Government propaganda encouraged this patriotism. There were posters to make the soldiers seem like heroes. News of victories filled the newspapers. Films were made of mock-up trenches and staged attacks 'over the top' to be shown in the new cinemas which had rapidly become popular. The Defence of the Realm Act, 1915, gave the government sweeping powers to stop any criticism of the war.

As you know, the reality of the war was that soldiers were fighting in conditions which were far from heroic. The dreadful loss of life in the battles was hidden from the public by releasing the names of the dead only slowly, over several weeks. Most soldiers didn't particularly hate the Germans who they realised were stuck in an awful situation, just like they were. Soldiers at home on leave found a huge gap between how people at home saw the war and how they felt about it.

Conscientious objectors.

In theory, British citizens had the right to refuse to serve in the armed forces if they were 'conscientious objectors'; that is, if they objected, because of their conscience or religious belief, to fighting. Pacifists, like Quakers and Jehovah's Witnesses, could explain their beliefs to a tribunal]. They could then do other non-military jobs like driving ambulances.

In fact, in the warlike and patriotic atmosphere of Britain at that time, these tribunals could take a very harsh line. Some conscientious objectors, COs, or 'conchies', had their objections refused. They had to join the army, and if they refused to fight could be shot for disobeying orders. Some were sent to prison with hard labour. So strong was the feeling against COs that they lost the right to vote for five years after the war.

Women at work.

At first women supported the war by encouraging recruitment. They provided 'comforts' for the troops: 232 million cigarettes, 16 million books and four million pairs of socks. People in 1914 had expected the war to be short and be 'over by Christmas'. Once it became clear this would not happen, women began to demand 'the right to serve' in more serious ways.

In peacetime Britain women were not treated equally at work. Many jobs were closed to them completely. But by 1915 there was an acute shortage of workers as so many men had gone off to fight. In this situation employers and Trade Unions relaxed their rules and took on women workers. Women worked in factories, particularly those making armaments and 'munitions.'

They also became bus conductors, bank clerks, ambulance drivers and nurses. Over 260,000 women worked on the land, growing essential food.

Women showed that they could do many jobs for which they had previously been thought incapable. The national crisis of the war overcame male prejudices as nothing else could. Men were obliged to revise their opinions about whether women should work and what work they could do.

Although many women lost their jobs after the war when the soldiers came home, their contribution to the war effort meant that many men had to change their views about women's equality.